

## URGENT APPEAL - THE OBSERVATORY

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**LBR 001 / 1216 / OBS 106**  
Threats /Judicial harassment /  
Arbitrary detention / Release

**Liberia**

December 12, 2016

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a partnership of FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), requests your urgent intervention in the following situation in **Liberia**.

### Description of the situation:

The Observatory has been informed by reliable sources about the judicial harassment and threats against Mr. **Alfred Lahai Brownell**, Lead Advocate of Green Advocates<sup>1</sup>, and his staff.

According to the information received, on October 28, 2016, plain clothed police officers, who allegedly appeared under the influence of alcohol, visited Green Advocates' premises in Monrovia and presented staff members with an arrest warrant issued on October 28, 2016 against Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell and an unidentified "office assistant" for allegedly failing to respond to a subpoena enquiry to provide testimony in connection with a war crimes case involving Gus van Kouwenhoven, a Dutch citizen<sup>2</sup>. At the time of the visit, Mr. Brownell was not present in Green Advocates' offices.

On November 2, 2016, plain clothed security officers from the Liberia National Police stormed into Alfred Lahai Brownell's home in order to arrest him, armed with a second arrest warrant issued on October 31, 2016. This time, the warrant mandated the Liberian security and police forces to arrest not only Mr. Alfred Brownell and an "office assistant", but also "others to be identified", which was apparently interpreted by police to apply to all staff members of Green Advocates. Green Advocates' Administrative Officer, Mr. **Aaron Abban**, was informed by his neighbours that police officers visited his home and asked about his location. Three other senior management staff members at Green Advocates – Messrs. **Francis Colee**, Deputy Director and Head of Programs, **Maminah Carr**, Head of Secretariat of the Natural Resources Women Platform, and **Paul Larry George**, Chair of the Alliance for Rural Democracy (ARD), also reported that security personnel visited their homes and communities making inquiries about their whereabouts and locations.

A third arrest warrant was issued on November 1, 2016, mandating security personnel to search for Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell, an office assistant and "others to be identified charged with criminal contempt of court" at Mr. Brownell's home and the office of Green Advocates.

On the morning of November 2, 2016, around 7:30 AM, security agents forcibly entered Mr. Brownell's home. As Mr. Brownell was absent, they arrested his uncle, John Brownell, without providing any legal ground for it. After nine hours in detention, he was released after paying a fine of 100 USD. Fearing for further arbitrary arrests and detentions, Green Advocates' staff could not return to their offices, and several decided to go into hiding, taking along some of their family members.

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<sup>1</sup> □ Green Advocates is an environmental law organisation dedicated to the empowerment of citizens in environmental decision-making and advocacy for rural, indigenous and tribal people.

<sup>2</sup> □ Mr. Brownell has been providing support on the Kouwenhoven case but he declined several voluntary invitations to participate in the current proceedings due to an ongoing campaign of intimidation against him and his colleagues from Green Advocates and was unaware of any subpoena requiring his testimony. Unofficially, the arrest warrant seems to be linked to the failure of an 18 billion dollar investment for which the President blames Green Advocates.

On November 21, 2016, the arrest warrants and contempt proceedings against Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell and his office assistant were officially dropped after a motion filed by their lawyer to purge the writ. As of writing this appeal, Green Advocates staff members are hoping to return home and resume their human rights work, in spite of the precarious safety situation they continue to face.

The series of arrest warrants seems to be linked to the community-based advocacy work carried out by Green Advocates throughout Liberia, especially in Sinoe County, where the organisation assisted communities to file a complaint over rights abuses by palm oil company Golden Veroleum, a subsidiary of the Singapore-listed company Golden Agri Ressources. High-ranking officials of the Government of Liberia, including the President of Liberia herself, have publicly condemned Green Advocates for undermining national sovereignty through the use of the grievance mechanism of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)<sup>3</sup>.

The Observatory strongly condemns the arbitrary and disproportionate nature of the arrest warrants and the way in which they were executed, which clearly aim at sanctioning Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell and all of Green Advocates staff for their legitimate human rights activities. The Observatory is concerned by potential negative repercussions of this criminalisation campaign on the security of Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell and all of Green Advocates staff.

The Observatory would like to recall that the Liberian authorities have been systematically harassing members of Green Advocates since 2014<sup>4</sup>. Highly placed officials in the Government have accused them of fraud, terrorism, economic sabotage and sedition. The defamation campaign also took place through press articles in which Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell has been accused by Salala Rubber Company of trespass and “terrorising” its employees by organising “mass meetings” on a rubber plantation in the Margibi County. Their offices have been raided, and their community clients face frivolous criminal charges, illegal detentions threats of potential judicial harassment. The Observatory fears this systematic pattern of harassment and threats is linked to Green Advocates’ work to defend the rights of indigenous communities impacted by large-scale oil palm and rubber production in the country.

The Observatory calls upon the authorities to immediately cease all forms of harassment, including at judicial level, against Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell and Green Advocates, their local community clients, as well as against all human rights defenders in the country.

Moreover, the Observatory urges the Liberian authorities to conduct a thorough, impartial, and transparent criminal investigation into the various threats and acts of violence and invasion against Green Advocates and its community-based allies, and to adopt all the necessary measures to ensure that Green Advocates can resume their human rights work, in particular their work in support of rural communities.

#### **Actions requested:**

Please write to the authorities of Liberia asking them to:

- i. Put an end to all acts of harassment, including at the judicial level, as well as surveillance and threats against Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell, members of his family, and all Green Advocates’ staff as well as against all human rights defenders in Liberia;

<sup>3</sup> See the President’s 2014 State of the Union address : <http://www.liberianobserver.com/politics/full-text-president-sirleafs-state-nation-address-national-legislature>; <http://allafrica.com/stories/201505290427.html>; the Government of Liberia Statement: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201505290427.html>; Article in *The Inquirer*: [http://www.theinquirer.com.lr/content1.php?main=news&news\\_id=156](http://www.theinquirer.com.lr/content1.php?main=news&news_id=156)

<sup>4</sup> For more information see the Observatory’s Annual Report 2014, *We are not afraid” Land rights defenders: attacked for confronting unbridled development*, p. 47.

- ii. Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of Mr. Alfred Lahai Brownell, members of his family, all Green Advocates' staff and all human rights defenders in Liberia;
- iii. Conduct a thorough, impartial, and transparent criminal investigation into the above-mentioned acts in order to identify those responsible, bring them before a competent and impartial tribunal, and apply to them the sanctions provided by the law;
- iv. Comply with all the provisions of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, in particular with its Article 1, 6(a) and 12,2;
- v. Ensure in respect in all circumstances for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments ratified by Liberia.

**Addresses:**

- Mrs. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia. Email: [info@emansion.gov.lr](mailto:info@emansion.gov.lr)
- Cllr. Fredrick Cherue, Minister of Justice and Attorney General. Email: [somahm@moj.gov.lr](mailto:somahm@moj.gov.lr)
- Bartholomew B. Colley, Acting Chairperson, Independent National Commission on Human Rights Liberia. Email: [bbcolley1961@gmail.com](mailto:bbcolley1961@gmail.com)
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- Embassy of Liberia in Brussels. Fax: +32 (0)2 411 09 12. E-mail: [info@embassyofliberia.be](mailto:info@embassyofliberia.be)

Please also write to the diplomatic missions or embassies of Liberia in your respective country.

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Paris-Geneva, December 12, 2016

Kindly inform us of any action undertaken quoting the code of this appeal in your reply.

*The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (the Observatory) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders. FIDH and OMCT are both members of ProtectDefenders.eu, the European Union Human Rights Defenders Mechanism implemented by international civil society.*

To contact the Observatory, call the emergency line:

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